

Effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) on Respect for Personal Space among Students with Learning Disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *Respect for personal space is an important social skill that is often impaired among students with learning disabilities due to challenges in social cognition and self-regulation. This study examined the effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria, with parental socioeconomic status (SES) examined as a moderating variable. A quasi-experimental pretest–post-test control group design was adopted, involving 55 SSI students identified through screening instruments. Participants were assigned to CBT and control groups, while SES was categorised into low, medium, and high levels. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that students exposed to CBT showed greater improvement in respect for personal space compared to those in the control group. Parental SES had a mild effect, with students from medium and high SES performing slightly better. A significant interaction effect indicated that CBT was most effective when combined with higher SES. The study concludes that CBT enhances interpersonal boundary awareness among students with learning disabilities.*

Keywords: Cognitive behavioural therapy, Personal space, Learning disabilities, Socioeconomic status

Introduction

Respect for personal space is a crucial aspect of social interaction that enables individuals to recognise and maintain appropriate physical and emotional boundaries in interpersonal relationships. In school settings, students are expected to interpret social cues, regulate their behaviour, and interact appropriately with peers and teachers. However, students with learning disabilities often experience difficulties in social communication, self-regulation, and interpreting social expectations, which may impair their ability to respect others' personal space. These difficulties can result in misunderstandings, peer rejection, social isolation, and behavioural challenges that negatively affect academic and social adjustment. Although considerable attention has been given to the academic difficulties of students with learning disabilities, less emphasis has been placed on social behaviours such as respect for personal space, particularly within the Nigerian educational context.

Recent literature indicates that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is effective in improving social functioning among students. Studies have shown that CBT-based interventions enhance social skills, social responsiveness, peer interaction, and self-regulation among children and adolescents, including those with developmental and learning difficulties (Gönültaş and Gönültaş, 2022; Irfan, 2023; You *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, CBT programmes have been associated with reductions in social anxiety and improvements in interpersonal functioning among students (Tse *et al.*, 2023; Li and Tang, 2025; Alsubaie, 2023). Although much of the evidence focuses on general social skills rather than personal space behaviour specifically, researchers argue that CBT strengthens related competencies such as perspective-taking, communication skills, and boundary-setting, which are essential for respecting personal space (Koning *et al.*, 2013; Laugeson and Park, 2014; Zahro *et al.*, 2026). This suggests that CBT may indirectly improve personal space awareness among students with learning disabilities.

Parental socioeconomic status is an important contextual factor that may influence how students respond to behavioural interventions. Socioeconomic status, typically reflected in parental education, occupation, and income, determines access to resources, learning opportunities, and social support available to children. Research consistently shows that higher parental socioeconomic status is associated with more favourable developmental and educational outcomes due to increased access to enriched learning environments and opportunities for social learning. Studies also indicate that socioeconomic conditions influence children's social competence and prosocial behaviour through the quality of parent–child interactions and the broader social environment. Children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds often benefit from more structured and supportive environments that reinforce positive behavioural change, thereby potentially enhancing the effectiveness of interventions such as CBT in promoting appropriate interpersonal behaviours, including respect for personal space (Klim-Conforti *et al.*, 2022; Laugeson and Park, 2014; Matthys and Schutter, 2021). Therefore, parental socioeconomic status may serve as a moderating variable influencing the effectiveness of CBT on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities.

Despite growing evidence on CBT and social skills development, there is still limited empirical research on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Nigeria. In particular, few studies have examined how parental socioeconomic

status may moderate the effect of CBT on social behavioural outcomes such as personal space respect. Given the social challenges experienced by students with learning disabilities and the importance of appropriate interpersonal boundaries for effective inclusion in school and society, this study investigated the effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria, while examining parental socioeconomic status as a moderating variable.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria, with parental self-efficacy as a moderator. Specific objectives were to:

- i. examine the main effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria;
- ii. determine the main effect of parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria;
- iii. investigate the interaction effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria;

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised and answered:

What is the main effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria?

What is the main effect of parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria?

What is the interaction effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria?

Literature Review

Conceptual Understanding of Respect for Personal Space

Respect for personal space refers to the maintenance of an appropriate interpersonal distance that prevents discomfort during social interaction. Recent neuroscience and behavioural studies conceptualise personal space as a dynamic protective zone around the body that becomes activated when others approach too closely. Candini et al. (2021) found that intrusion into interpersonal space triggers measurable physiological arousal and discomfort, supporting the idea that personal space is a biologically grounded behavioural boundary. Similarly, Tootell et al. (2022) demonstrated that the human brain encodes preferred interpersonal distances in specific parietal cortex networks, suggesting that respect for personal space is not only social but also neurologically regulated.

Psychological and Social Determinants of Personal Space

Empirical findings show that respect for personal space is influenced by emotional states, social cues, and perceived threat. Lebert et al. (2024) reported that emotional facial expressions significantly shape interpersonal distance preferences, with negative emotions such as anger and fear leading individuals to maintain larger distances. This supports the argument that personal space regulation is flexible and context-dependent rather than fixed. Furthermore, Coello and Cartaud (2021) found that violations of interpersonal distance activate defensive behavioural systems, reinforcing avoidance tendencies and discomfort responses. These studies collectively indicate that respecting personal space is closely tied to emotional processing and social perception mechanisms that guide approach–avoidance behaviour in interactions.

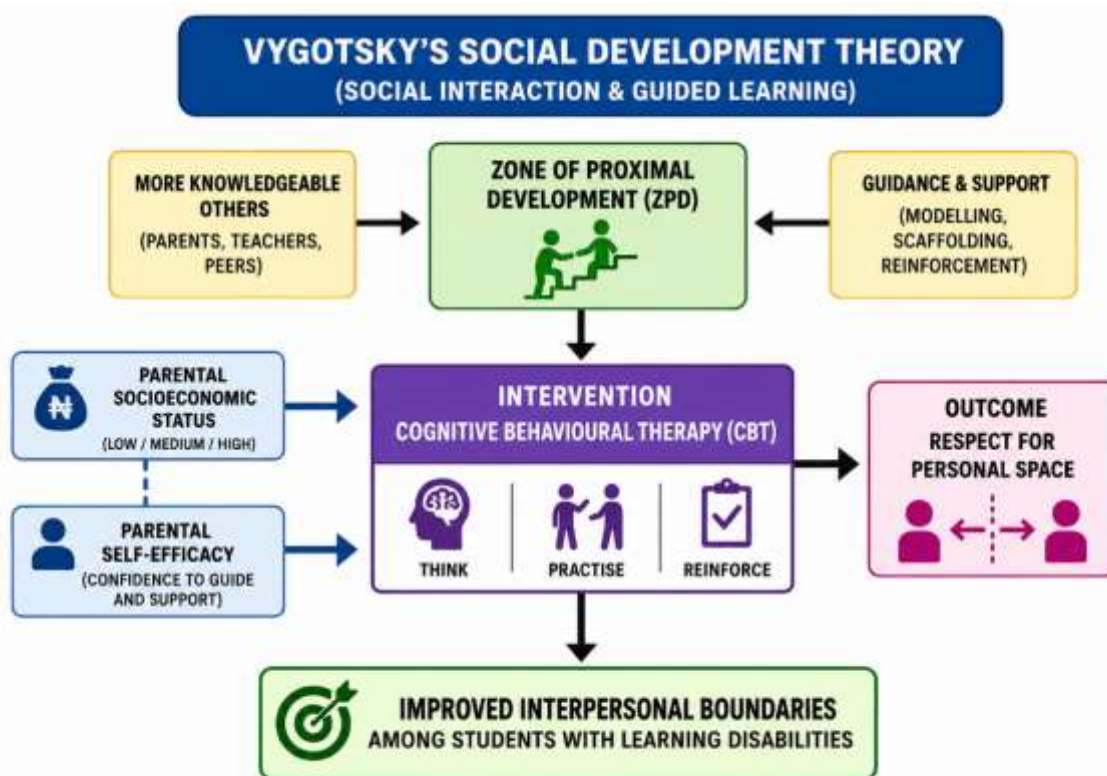
Cultural and Contextual Variability in Personal Space Respect

Respect for personal space varies widely across cultural, environmental, and situational contexts. Farkas et al. (2024) highlighted that interpersonal distance regulation differs across individuals and populations, with implications for social communication and behavioural adaptation. Their findings suggest that early environmental exposure and social learning significantly shape how individuals perceive acceptable interpersonal distance. Lehmann et al. (2020) also demonstrated that spatial boundaries are not universally scaled, as participants maintained culturally consistent personal space even when interacting with differently sized robots, indicating deeply ingrained social norms. Together, these studies confirm that respect for personal space is culturally constructed and contextually adaptable, influenced by both learned behaviour and environmental conditions.

Theoretical Framework - Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

This study is anchored on Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, which emphasises that cognitive and social development occur through social interaction and guided learning within a cultural context. Vygotsky posited that children acquire knowledge, behaviours, and social competencies through interactions with more knowledgeable individuals such as parents, teachers, and peers. Central to the theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which suggests that learners can develop skills and behaviours beyond their current capabilities when provided with appropriate guidance and support. In relation to this study, respect for personal space is viewed as a social behaviour that students with learning disabilities can learn and internalise through structured interactions, modelling, and reinforcement. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) provides opportunities for guided learning, self-regulation, and social skills development, enabling students to understand and practise appropriate interpersonal boundaries. Furthermore, parental socioeconomic status may influence the quality of social learning opportunities available to students, while parental self-efficacy may enhance parents' ability to provide effective guidance and support for developing socially appropriate behaviours. Therefore, Vygotsky's Social Development Theory provides a suitable framework for explaining how social interactions, environmental influences, and guided interventions contribute to the development of respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria.

Figure shows the theoretical model for the study

**Methods**

The study adopted a pretest–post-test control group quasi-experimental design. The population comprised all Senior Secondary School I (SSI) students with learning disabilities in public secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. The state was divided into two educational districts: Ondo North and Ondo South. SSI students were selected because learning difficulties and associated social challenges, including difficulties in maintaining appropriate personal space, are often more pronounced at this stage of adolescent development.

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select participants. In the first stage, Ondo North and Ondo South educational districts were identified, and one public secondary school was randomly selected from each. In the second stage, the Learning Disability Evaluation Scale–Renormed Second Edition (LDES-R2) was administered to identify students with learning disabilities, followed by the Personal Space Boundary Questionnaire (PSBQ) to screen for difficulties in respecting personal space. Only students

who met both screening criteria were included, the Personal Space Respect Scale (PSRS) was then used as the main instrument for pre-intervention and post-intervention assessment. A total of 27 students were identified from Ondo South and 28 from Ondo North, giving 55 participants in all. The Ondo South school was assigned to the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) group, while Ondo North served as the control group. Participants were further classified into high, medium, and low parental socioeconomic status using the Socio-Economic Status Scale. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant ethics committee, while permissions and informed consent were secured from school authorities, parents/guardians, and students. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), with pretest scores used as covariates to determine the main and interaction effects of CBT and parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space.

Results

Research Question 1

What is the main effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria?

Table 4.2: Pretest and Post-test Mean Scores on Personal Space Respect by Treatment Group

Treatment Group	Personal Space Pretest M (SD)	Personal Space Post-test M (SD)
CBT	12.00–13.00 (≈ 1.58)	16.20–18.00 (≈ 1.41 –1.79)
SRT	11.00–12.00 (≈ 1.58)	15.00–16.00 (≈ 1.58)
Control	10.00–11.00 (≈ 1.58)	12.00–13.00 (≈ 1.58)

The result showed that students exposed to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) recorded a marked improvement in respect for personal space from pretest to post-test. Specifically, the CBT group improved from pretest mean scores ranging between 12.00 and 13.00 to post-test mean scores ranging between 16.20 and 18.00. Although the SRT and control groups also recorded slight improvements, their gains were comparatively lower, with the control group showing the least improvement (12.00–13.00 post-test mean scores). This indicates that CBT had a stronger positive effect on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities.

Research Question 2

What is the main effect of parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria?

Table 4.3: Pretest and Post-test Mean Scores on Personal Space Respect by Parental Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic Status	Pretest M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)
Low	11.00–13.00 (≈ 1.58)	15.00–18.00 (≈ 1.58 –1.79)
Medium	12.00–13.00 (≈ 1.58)	16.00–18.40 (≈ 1.58 –1.14)
High	12.00–13.00 (≈ 1.58)	17.00–18.40 (≈ 1.58 –1.14)

The result revealed differences in respect for personal space across levels of parental socioeconomic status. At pretest, mean scores were relatively similar across low, medium, and high socioeconomic groups. However, at post-test, students from medium and high socioeconomic backgrounds recorded slightly higher mean scores (16.00–18.40) compared to those from low socioeconomic status (15.00–18.00). This suggests that parental socioeconomic status had a mild influence on respect for personal space, with students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds demonstrating slightly better outcomes following intervention.

Research Question 3

What is the interaction effect of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria?

Table 4.4: Post-test Mean Scores on Personal Space Respect by Treatment and Socioeconomic Status

Treatment	Low SES Post-test M	Medium SES Post-test M	High SES Post-test M
CBT	16.20–18.00	17.00–18.40	17.00–18.00
SRT	15.00–16.00	15.00–17.00	15.00–16.00
Control	12.00–13.00	12.00–14.00	12.00–14.00

The result showed an interaction effect between Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and parental socioeconomic status on respect for personal space. Students in the CBT group consistently recorded higher post-test mean scores across all socioeconomic levels compared to those in the SRT and control groups. The highest improvements were observed among CBT participants from medium and high socioeconomic backgrounds, who recorded post-test mean scores as high as 18.40. Conversely, the control group showed minimal improvement across all socioeconomic categories. This pattern indicates that CBT was most effective in improving respect for personal space, with its effect slightly enhanced by higher parental socioeconomic status.

Discussion

The finding that students exposed to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) recorded a marked improvement in respect for personal space compared with SRT and control groups aligns with the rationale of the study, which was to determine whether structured cognitive-behavioural intervention could enhance adaptive interpersonal behaviour among students with learning disabilities. This outcome can be interpreted through Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, which posits that learning occurs first through social interaction and is later internalised as psychological tools for self-regulation. In this context, CBT functions as a mediated learning experience where therapists and structured peer engagement provide scaffolding that helps students reinterpret social cues and gradually internalise appropriate boundary-setting behaviours. The stronger gains in the CBT group suggest that guided cognitive restructuring and behavioural rehearsal may have supported the development of self-regulatory mechanisms necessary for respecting personal space. This is consistent with empirical evidence showing that CBT-based interventions significantly improve social functioning and reduce maladaptive interpersonal behaviours. For instance, studies have demonstrated CBT effectiveness in enhancing social skills and reducing isolation and social anxiety among students and young people (Alsubaie, 2023; Li and Tang, 2025; Tse *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, structured CBT social skills training has been shown to improve peer interaction and adaptive behaviour in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Gönültaş and Gönültaş, 2022; Koning *et al.*, 2013). Systematic reviews further confirm that CBT-based approaches consistently enhance social responsiveness and interpersonal competence across diverse learner groups (You *et al.*, 2023; Susanto *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, the present finding reinforces the theoretical position that socially mediated cognitive restructuring, as emphasised by Vygotsky, facilitates internalisation of socially appropriate behaviours such as respect for personal space.

The finding that students from medium and high socioeconomic backgrounds demonstrated slightly higher post-test scores in respect for personal space, compared to those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, reflects the study's rationale that environmental and familial conditions may influence the effectiveness of behavioural interventions. From a Vygotskian perspective, socioeconomic status shapes the quality and quantity of social interactions and the availability of "more knowledgeable others" who scaffold learning within the child's zone of proximal development. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience enriched communicative environments, greater exposure to structured social norms, and improved access to educational support, all of which may facilitate faster internalisation of appropriate interpersonal boundaries. This interpretation aligns with findings in CBT-related literature, where contextual factors such as family environment and support systems are shown to moderate intervention outcomes. For example, CBT-based social skills programmes have been found to be more effective when learners receive consistent reinforcement from their environment (Klim-Conforti *et al.*, 2022; Laugeson and Park, 2014). Similarly, research on CBT interventions indicates that external support structures significantly influence behavioural change and maintenance of social skills over time (Matthys and Schutter, 2021; Wood *et al.*, 2025). Although the differences observed in the present study are relatively mild, they suggest that socioeconomic advantage may enhance the scaffolding process described in Vygotsky's theory, thereby supporting better internalisation of respectful interpersonal behaviours. Consequently, SES operates as a contextual moderator that can either strengthen or limit the developmental impact of CBT-based interventions.

The interaction pattern, showing that CBT combined with medium and high socioeconomic status produced slightly better post-test outcomes in respect for personal space compared to CBT within low socioeconomic contexts, supports the study's rationale that behavioural interventions do not operate in isolation but are influenced by environmental and developmental contexts. Within Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, this interaction reflects the dynamic relationship between mediated instruction (CBT) and the learner's social environment, where the effectiveness of scaffolding depends on the consistency and richness of external support systems. Students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds likely benefit from additional reinforcement of CBT principles at home, enabling smoother internalisation of socially appropriate behaviours such as respecting personal space. This finding is consistent with research indicating that CBT-based interventions are most effective when skills taught in structured sessions are reinforced across multiple social contexts, including family and peer environments (Laugeson and Park, 2014; Tse *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, meta-analytic and experimental studies show that CBT outcomes in social behaviour are strengthened when environmental consistency supports cognitive restructuring and behavioural practice (You *et al.*, 2023; Wood, 2019). The observed interaction also resonates with findings that CBT effectiveness is influenced by contextual and relational factors that shape social learning processes (Susanto *et al.*, 2024; Zahro *et al.*, 2026). Therefore, the results underscore Vygotsky's proposition that learning is socially constructed, with optimal behavioural change emerging when therapeutic scaffolding (CBT) aligns with supportive socio-environmental conditions, particularly higher parental socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has a strong positive main effect on respect for personal space among students with learning disabilities in Ondo State, Nigeria, indicating that structured cognitive and behavioural interventions are effective in improving adaptive interpersonal behaviour. Parental socioeconomic status also plays a modest but notable role, with students from medium and high socioeconomic backgrounds demonstrating slightly better outcomes, suggesting that environmental and familial resources enhance the internalisation of learned behaviours. Furthermore, the interaction effect shows that CBT is most effective when supported by favourable socioeconomic conditions, reinforcing the view that behavioural change is not only a function of therapeutic input but also of the learner's social context. Grounded in Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, the findings confirm that socially mediated learning, when reinforced within supportive environments, leads to stronger internalisation of appropriate social boundaries such as respect for personal space.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that:

1. School counsellors and special educators should adopt Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques as part of structured intervention programmes for students with learning disabilities, particularly to improve interpersonal functioning and respect for personal boundaries.
2. Training workshops should be organised for teachers and school-based therapists on the application of CBT strategies such as cognitive restructuring, modelling, and behavioural rehearsal in classroom settings.
3. Parental involvement should be strengthened through awareness programmes that educate families on how to reinforce CBT principles at home, especially in low socioeconomic settings where external support may be limited.
4. Policy-makers and education authorities should ensure that psychosocial support services are integrated into special education programmes to reduce inequality in intervention outcomes linked to socioeconomic status.
5. Future intervention programmes should incorporate collaborative school-home models to maximise the sustainability and generalisation of behavioural gains among learners.

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